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Date: Tue, Nov 1, 2011 at 11:58 AM

Subject: Fort Worth Star-Telegram Document

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TX)

May 13, 2009

Kimbell to be only U.S. museum with a Michelangelo painting

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Edition: Main

Section: Metro

Page: B04

Estimated printed pages: 5

Article Text:

FINE ARTS

*The work, from the Renaissance master's boyhood, is the earliest known Michelangelo painting in the world.

In an extraordinary coup, the Kimbell Art Museum has acquired the earliest known painting by Michelangelo, one of only four free-standing "easel paintings" by the Renaissance master in the world.

The Kimbell's purchase, *The Torment of Saint Anthony* (1487-88), will be the only painting by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) to enter the permanent collection of a U.S. museum. Two of the other paintings are in London's National Gallery and a third in Florence's Uffizi Gallery.

The opportunity to buy the work, for an undisclosed sum, came just weeks after newly appointed Kimbell Director Eric McCauley Lee arrived earlier this year. He was having lunch one day with former Kimbell Director Edmund "Ted" Pillsbury, who had heard about the painting that was being studied in the conservation studios at the Metropolitan Museum of New York. It was being studied and cleaned, and experts were weighing in. It was the right subject matter, but was it from the hand of the master?

Provenance was an issue. "I did not know anything about it," Lee said. "It sounds ludicrous when you first hear it, a painting by Michelangelo? How is it possible when there are so few? A drawing is more likely and in the realm of possibility, but a painting?"

Lee says he was skeptical, but he did more research, seeing the painting for himself in New York and

meeting the curators at the Met. After hearing their arguments and reading their reports, he had the painting brought to Fort Worth for further examination.

"Our only conclusion was it was painted by Michelangelo," Lee said. "It is a powerful painting and an extraordinary opportunity to have the only painting in North America by his hand."

Different style

The depiction of the characters and the composition are quite odd -- both for Michelangelo and for an Italian painting. Saint Anthony, who looks like a peeved grandfather, is surrounded by small monsters clinging to him like needy toddlers. They all float in a swirl of activity above a bucolic landscape.

There are incongruities of style and substance that make some scholars raise a doubting eyebrow. They are also the traits that cleave it to Michelangelo's biography and make other experts sure that it is indeed the painting of record. Two 16th-century Michelangelo biographers and the text record from the artist's funeral mention this painting and some of its salient details.

The three historical versions agree on these points: Michelangelo was all of 12 or 13 years old when he became friends with Francesco Granacci, an assistant in artist Domenico Ghirlandaio's workshop. When Michelangelo expressed an interest in painting, Granacci provided him with an engraving of Saint Anthony by the German artist Martin Schongauer, along with brushes, a wood panel and paint.

Michelangelo copied Schongauer's composition, made some changes to the demons' faces, positions and skin texture and added the landscape.

The results were considered as astounding then as they are now.

The painting showed up in Paris in 1837 and although there were discussions then about attribution, it was exhibited as a work by Michelangelo. It entered a private collection in Great Britain in 1905 and disappeared until 1999, when it was displayed in a show of young Michelangelo's work. There, it was attributed to the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio. A century of sequestering had cast a shadow of doubt.

Up for sale

Last summer it was offered at a Sotheby's auction in London, again attributed to the workshop, with a presale estimate of about \$200,000 to \$300,000. It was of great interest to New York City art dealer Adam Williams. He suspected that it was the missing Michelangelo and he knew that Everett Fahy, chairman of the department of European paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, firmly believed it to be so.

Williams said that once he saw the work in person he was convinced; apparently others were too. The night of the auction, Williams said, there was a great deal of competition, but the other bidders dropped out as the price escalated past the one-million-dollar mark.

Lot 69 sold for about \$2 million to Williams, who planned to resell it. "I don't sell a lot of pictures, but I

try to sell good ones," he said. "This one I am really proud of."

He has a long history with the Kimbell. He found their Lucas Cranach, Andrea Mantegna and Giovanni Tiepolo paintings.

Williams took the painting to the conservation department at the Met where it underwent infrared reflectography and X-rays. The panel and the paint were examined.

It was determined that the work was not a copy of Michelangelo's 500-year-old painting, which is what the skeptics maintain. The bottom layers showed pentimenti -- the artist's changes as the work progressed, how he deviated from the original sketch, made a change of emphasis, or a simplification of the draped garment. These sorts of changes do not appear in copies.

There are instances where Michelangelo improved on Schongauer's composition, making it tighter and making the play of positive and negative space more interesting.

In one of the biographies, Michelangelo was said to have visited the local fish market for visual reference for painting the fish scales on one of his demons. He also changed their faces to look more like that of a monkey and a bat. All of these nuanced differences show up in the newly cleaned painting. He also made his figures more three-dimensional, presaging the young artist's talents as a sculptor.

Beating out the Met

After years of yellowed varnish and dark over-painting were removed, the curators and conservation staff at the Met were in agreement: This was the missing painting by Michelangelo. However, in the months since the auction, the international economic situation had deteriorated. The Met was unable to purchase the painting. When the Met pulled out, it became the Kimbell's good fortune.

The Kimbell declines to say what it paid for the work, and no one in art circles is willing to put a price on a Michelangelo painting. Sotheby's won't guess what the Kimbell paid, but offers up Sotheby's 2002 sale of a Peter Paul Rubens' *The Massacre of the Innocents* for \$69 million as comparable -- although rarity wasn't a factor as eight of Ruben's paintings sold at auction in 2002.

What most art experts say is there is no Michelangelo precedent: The consensus is that it's priceless.

But apparently "priceless" still has a price tag: "We were able to afford it," says the Kimbell's Lee, whose institution said it had an endowment of \$350 million in February.

The painting will go on exhibit at the Met this summer, then come home to Fort Worth.

"This way it recognizes the Met for its contributions," says Lee. "It would not be coming to the Kimbell if not for what Met did."

History of the work

Read more on the history of *The Torment of Saint Anthony* at www.kimbellart.org

'The Torment of Saint Anthony'

Provenance

1830s: Galleria Scorzi, Pisa, Italy

1837: Acquired by Baron Henri-Joseph-Francois de Triqueti. Subsequently inherited by his daughter, Mrs. Lee-Childe, Baroness de Triqueti

1886: At the baroness' deceased sale in Paris, it went unsold and was subsequently given to Sir Paul Harvey by Mr. Lee-Childe before 1905

Descended through family

1960: Put up for auction at Sotheby's London (attributed to Michelangelo) and went unsold

2008: Put up for auction at Sotheby's London (attributed to the workshop of Ghirlandaio) and sold for about \$2 million (including buyer's premium) to Adam Williams Fine Arts Ltd.

2009: Sold by Adam Williams Fine Arts Ltd. to Kimbell Art Museum, price undisclosed

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Record Number: MERLIN_17087741